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Green Party

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Executive Summary

In the lead up to the UK General Election in May 2015, the Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW) experienced exponential growth in membership. By August 2015 the membership was almost five times what it was at the end of 2013.¹ Similarly in Scotland, membership of the Green Party Scotland (GPS) grew enormously in the space of twelve months from approximately 1200 in 2014 to 9200 in July 2015. This growth became known as the 'Green surge'.

The objective of my trip was to examine the strategies and techniques employed by GPEW and GPS to so rapidly and successfully increase their membership base and voter engagement. I was interested to know whether grass-roots engagement techniques or online marketing were more effective or whether a combination of the two was necessary. I focused my research on marketing and engagement, campaign strategy and engagement with Young Greens and young voters generally.

It became rapidly apparent that, in large part, the Green surge occurred less because of an intentional strategy employed by the Green Party to increase membership and more because of a sense of disaffection experienced by those who were previously members and supporters of other parties such as the Liberal Democrats (LibDems) and the Labour Party (Labour). The broader political environment apparent at the time of the election also generated much of the surge, as an anti-austerity reaction to the politics of the Conservatives. As a result, my research questions pivoted towards an examination of the techniques employed or necessary to manage such a large and rapid increase in membership.

When I arrived in the UK, it was just over a month since the general election and much of the focus for the party shifted towards consolidating the gains made, retaining members and planning for the next campaign. I had originally planned to visit the UK during the general election campaign to examine the techniques used in campaigning and how they differed to Australia. In hindsight it was more beneficial for me to engage with GPEW and GPS outside the intensity of an election campaign, during a period of introspection.

During my study tour, I met and interviewed members of GPEW national office, elected representatives, leaders, Young Greens convenors, candidates and volunteers. I also met with staff, party officials, elected representatives and candidates of the GPS. My tour took me to London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Edinburgh.

My research produced three broad learnings about the member retention that are relatable to the Australian Greens experience:

- The need to build the infrastructure and capacity of local parties/branches to manage the membership increases at a local and regional level;
- A commitment to constant campaigning on progressive issues, as opposed to just focussing on elections is vital to member engagement and retention; and
- Members who show leadership potential need to be nurtured and developed early to build the capacity of the party into the future.

These messages were consistent across the majority of my interviews. I will outline my observations on each of these points as well as discuss the elements that lead to the surge and how these could be leveraged to a similar degree in Australia.

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The Green Surge – Other parties’ losses became Green Party gains

Green Party of England and Wales

There were two aspects of UK politics in the previous two years that were seen by most as the main contributing factors in the Green surge: the broad political environment/rhetoric at the time and the decision to not allow Natalie Bennett, Leader of GPEW, to participate in the Leadership debates. The other reasons for the surge included the push for greater professionalism and the work of the GPEW Leader in the previous two years.

Failures on the Left and austerity on the Right

For many of those I interviewed, the Green surge was both exciting and anxiety-inducing. There was no doubt that a huge proportion of the Green surge resulted from a feeling of frustration, disappointment and disillusionment from former members of Labour and the LibDems.

The Conservatives had made it clear that austerity was their preferred path to prosperity. Changes to the welfare system and the continued support of the wealthy elites and Big Business galvanised many on the Left. The failures of Labour under Ed Miliband to create a credible alternative to the austerity of the Conservatives and the anger and disappointment generated from the performance of the LibDems in coalition lead to an exodus of members from these parties, many of whom ended up amongst GPEW ranks.

While this was obviously a positive result for the Green Party, it also meant a large number of new members with previous experience and expectations of political parties. I had originally expected this group of new members would create a risk for the party by potentially diluting the values of the Greens Parties in the UK. In fact, these new members shared the values of the Green Party and were aware of Greens politics prior to joining.² For many of those I interviewed, the greatest potential issue from an influx of former Labour and LibDem members is a changing of the culture about how things are done; moving from grassroots to more centralised decision making or changing policy to make it more centrist and diluting the more radical elements of policy.³



Photo with Amelia Womack, GPEW Co-Deputy Leader, 21.07.15

The acknowledgment of this challenge also highlighted the change in party demographics between those more well-established members who had a long experience with GPEW and those newer members with newer ideas wanting to change processes.⁴ This demographic change also highlighted the differences in the party between those who took a more pragmatic approach (through greater professionalisation and centralisation) and those who believed pragmatic change had the potential to undermine principled campaigning.

As one Young Greens member pointed out, *“many Young Greens have more radical politics than the older Green Party members. We’re typically more socially progressive, anti-capitalist. This may raise tensions between the two groups in the future, particularly as more people want to attend conferences and battle out ideas.”*⁵

These challenges are not unique to GPEW and no doubt acknowledgement of them will assist the party to find mutually agreeable solutions.

Locked out of the Leaders' Debate

The second major catalyst for the surge came from the decision to deny the Leader of GPEW an opportunity to participate in the Leaders' Debate. The decision by the media regulator to deny GPEW a spot in the debate because 'they weren't a major party' enraged many activists, especially in light of the decision to allow Nigel Farage, Leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a place in the debate. This decision, and the outrage it generated, led to the largest spike in Green Party membership in the two years leading up to the election.⁶ The push to get the Green Party into the debate generated a large online campaign that galvanised many Left activists to join GPEW. Consequently, the campaign also provided the Conservatives a political opportunity to wedge the Labour Party by refusing to participate in the Debates without the Green Party being involved.⁷

Ultimately, being denied access to the Leaders' Debate allowed GPEW to articulate their message through the corresponding media interest in the situation and leverage off the growing online resentment directed towards the older political establishment. Being locked out of the debate may have provided a greater catalyst for the membership surge than the eventual participation in the debate itself.

Professionalise to prosper

To suggest the surge was entirely a result of a disillusionment among former supporters of other parties would deny the important strategic work undertaken by GPEW to professionalise their approach, in order to capitalise on the situation. Unlike the Australian Greens structure, where independent Greens State Parties remain constituted as a federation and members join the State Party rather than the Australian Greens, GPEW structure is more reminiscent of the structure of a State Party such as the Queensland Greens or Victorian Greens. Members join GPEW and, simultaneously, an affiliated Local Green Party. This makes the success of Local Parties absolutely critical in both the membership surge and membership retention (something I will discuss below).

The GPEW national office made a strategic decision to professionalise the operations of the Party in the lead up to the election to capitalise on the feeling of disillusionment. Website congruence between the National Party websites and Local Party websites, upgrading the member's section of the website to make it more user-friendly and updating databases to provide Local Parties with information on members, volunteers and supporters all worked to help drive membership increases and build the capacity of Local Parties to cope with the surge. The national office also employed more full-time equivalent staff, including two Local Party Development Officers, to facilitate their increased ambitions during the general election.

While there is no doubt these changes assisted in the management of the surge, for some of those I interviewed, moves towards greater professionalism ought to be measured. They cautioned against a move towards the slick, professionalised parties of their rivals, who spoke in sound bites and relied on focus groups. While a professional operation that builds and develops strong, well-organised support networks, strengthens the capacity of candidates and media spokespeople and nurtures leadership is vital, this is very different from being a party where every candidate, MP and staff member is 'suited and booted' and there is a paper-thin difference between the Parties.⁸

Conversely, however, there was recognition that unless new staff have skills in political activism or experience as political advisors, the party will still lack the necessary professionalism. There is still a need to identify and create pathways for those members with such skills in the party, to retain them and not lose them to like-minded organisations or Green-Left NGOs.⁹

Grassroots Leadership

The Leader of GPEW is elected by members at the National Conference and is paid a stipend to assist them to conduct their necessary engagement work. For the first time since Carolyn Lucas MP was elected in 2010, GPEW had a leader who had no seat in Westminster. Nonetheless, almost all of those interviewed agreed that the grassroots work of Natalie Bennett over the two years prior to the UK general election helped drive the membership surge, something that may not have been possible for a Member of Parliament.

As the leader elected by GPEW to replace the messianic figure of Carolyn Lucas MP, Natalie had an expectant and hopeful Party to lead to the 2015 UK general election. She worked tirelessly in those two years and by all accounts, her non-stop traverse of England and Wales won many admirers and supporters. Some of the towns she visited were small and had never had a leader from any political party visit their town. To have a politician, let alone a Party Leader, consider them deserving of a visit won a great deal of support and assisted with their narrative as a viable alternative and not just a single-issue party for the inner-city, middle-class, professional.

The leadership tour undoubtedly assisted with engagement and built the momentum for the membership surge. One event at a University campus for example attracted over 1000 young people with many more on a waiting list hoping to attend.¹⁰

Green Party of Scotland

As a percentage increase, the GPS membership surge is even more remarkable. From a base of approximately 1,200 in early 2014 to 1,700 by the Scottish Independence Referendum (18.09.14) up to approximately 9,200 members in July 2015, an increase of almost 800 percent in just over 18 months.¹¹

The Yes Scotland campaign – a chance to share the GPS vision



Photo with Ross Greer, GPS Party Development Officer on the steps of the Scottish Assembly, 28.07.15

The major reason for the surge in Scotland was undoubtedly the Yes Scotland campaign for the Scottish Independence Referendum that provided the platform for GPS to engage with voters on a broad, progressive political narrative and articulate their vision for a progressive Scotland.

For one key GPS activist in the Yes Scotland campaign, the *“independence movement gave incredible impetus for the membership surge. The social effect of like-minded people coalescing around a single focus became a natural reason for people to stay and continue to be part of something they were proud and excited about – the Independence movement was transformative and empowering.”*¹²

Far from being a considered strategy to facilitate growth, the membership surge which resulted from two years of strong campaigning on progressive Green Party policies left the GPS unprepared and their infrastructure failed to cope (their server crashed on one day when large numbers of new members attempted to join at the same time for example). What GPS recognised was that these new members were not just joining because they believed in an independent Scotland, they were joining to be part of something much broader. Although the party had concerns the new members may change the

direction or bring different values, the reality was that many new members were former supporters who had not yet taken the step of joining.

The surge brought an influx of young members (almost 40% of members are eligible to be Young Greens members) and many members with strong campaign skills and previous political experience.

The surge has assisted GPS to become a truly national party and run candidates and campaigns in areas of Scotland where they previously had zero presence such that new Local Parties are being constituted in these areas. The Independence movement allowed GPS to explain their politics and vision in areas they traditionally would have struggled in, thus increasing the political knowledge of voters. In a country where a centre-Left party dominates politics, in the form of the Scottish National Party (SNP), GPS struggle to pick up votes. Leveraging the high level of political engagement and knowledge amongst voters then becomes an important campaign strategy where strategic voting is encouraged to increase the proportion of the GPS members in the Scottish Assembly.¹³

For GPS, the issue of member retention has become the major focus. Encouraging and maintaining engagement with a group of new members who have entered the party on the back of a large, long-term campaign is seen as a challenge for GPS, especially where they had not prepared for the numbers of new members they received.

For both GPS and GPEW building the capacity of the Local Parties and regions, providing regular progressive political and issue based campaigns beyond elections, and utilising the enormous resource of the Young Greens members effectively are seen as critical for long-term member retention and engagement. These are issues relevant to the Australian Greens experience, to which I now turn my attention.

Member Retention – now that we’ve gained them, how do we keep them?

Once it became apparent the surge was as much a result of external factors as it was about a strategic approach by the Greens Parties, I focused my research on the techniques being used and contemplated to ensure all those new members would be retained. A decline in membership after such an enormous and public initial surge may be inevitable but a large decline posed a significant risk for GPEW and GPS both politically and financially. For some Local Parties, their growth since 2013 and particularly during the major surge around the UK general election was completely beyond expectation, impossible to anticipate and very difficult to manage.¹⁴ While these observations about membership retention are predominantly from a GPEW perspective, they are broadly relevant to the experience of GPS as well.

Local Parties are key

The theme of building Local Party capacity was evident across all my interviews. For Natalie Bennett, GPEW Leader, *“the greatest threat to membership retention is poor Local Party structures. ... Capacity building of Local Parties is key to membership retention. There must be a value proposition for them to engage with the party and remain engaged.”*¹⁵

While it was acknowledged that GPEW had done a great deal of internal work to build the capacity of Local Parties, including employing two Local Party Development Officers, this may not have been enough to assist them to manage the enormous influx of new, energised members hoping to engage in political campaigning. It was acknowledged these may have already been lost as some Local Parties did not have the internal mechanisms necessary to cope.

For many of those I interviewed, one of the key things a Local Party needs to do is make personal contact with new members as soon as possible after they join, within 24 – 48 hours if possible. While email is satisfactory as a medium for communication, it lacks the personal experience and should be avoided unless a face-to-face engagement or telephone call are impossible. Identifying a number of volunteers within each Local Party to act as ‘official greeters’ makes this job easier and increases the likelihood members will be engaged early and be more likely to stay.¹⁶

To assist the development of Local Parties, GPEW National Office held eight regional events in early 2015 and instituted regional coordinators who would work with Local Parties. These volunteer coordinators would engage with Local Parties in campaigns outside the traditional regional focus of organising around European Union Parliamentary Elections. These coordinators also became campaign managers for key constituencies.

The regional coordinators were effective for some constituencies but in the post-election review it was still acknowledged that the actual capacity of Local Parties was determinative of the efficacy and success of the regional coordinators. That is not to say Local Parties were not effective. There has been a long-term strategy for GPEW to build strong Local Parties that fight strongly on local government elections – to fulfil the goal of “*Westminster through City Hall*”.¹⁷ The GPEW results for local government elections have been impressive in some parts of the country, most notably in Brighton and Hove City Council where the Green Party were in minority control from 2011 to 2015.

While the experience of the Green Party in power in Brighton was less than satisfactory for some and may have made the re-election campaign of the GPEW’s only MP even more difficult,¹⁸ there is no question that strong and effective Local Parties are vital, especially those who win local elections. This is true not only for member retention but to help build the narrative of the Green Party as a viable alternative government.

Continuously campaign on progressive issues

The second key learning that was highlighted in many of my interviews was related to and reliant on the first; Local Parties need to be campaigning on progressive issues not just organising around elections. For the Young Greens, who are a semi-autonomous grouping of under 30s within GPEW, this is a key focus. Membership engagement, gains and retention comes down to organisation – having things for people to do and being prepared for them to want to do things. Young Greens groups across the country host training sessions in door-knocking, canvassing, candidate hustings, and how to talk about Greens politics and Green Economics. Young Greens coalesce in regional groupings to host their own conferences and gatherings to bring people together.¹⁹

This is a key focus for Local Parties in order to maintain the energy of the members gained through the surge. There is of course a need to balance the different needs and expectations of members and recognise that not all members want to be active and some are ‘armchair’ supporters, happy just to pay their membership each month.²⁰

Building the capacity of the Local Party to manage new members is vital, but having the campaign nous and relevant issues to campaign around requires a different set of skills. This is where connections with other like-minded organisations can assist Local Parties in providing opportunities for members to campaign on the issues they care about. It also requires a discussion about



Photo with Martin Dobson, GPEW Candidate for Liverpool Riverside, 26.07.15

the difference between a political campaign where Parliamentary / Council representation is the goal versus a political campaign where progressive change and challenging the political status quo is the objective.

Identify and develop future leaders

One of the clear benefits of a large membership influx is the increase in potential Party leaders and candidates. The identification and development of these future leaders was seen by many as an important retention strategy. The approach taken by the Young Greens in their 30 under 30 program was mentioned consistently as being a valuable resource for nurturing talent, one that GPEW wish to emulate more broadly.

30 under 30

The Young Greens' 30 under 30 program is a 12 month fast track scheme to develop 30 Young Greens members and educate them on all aspects of GPEW; the aim is to train and promote the next generation of activists in the Green Party. The program includes several weekends of training, access to mentors, volunteer opportunities at the Green Party National Conference and a trip to the EU Parliament in Brussels. Participants are taught about the structures of GPEW and Young Greens, the governance structures including an introduction to the Green Party Executive (GPEx), Regional Council, Green Party Conference, Greens Members of European Parliament (MEPs), Greens in Local Government and Young Greens Executive.

The 30 under 30 participants are also trained in policy development and media. Party spokespeople educate participants on their various policy and the policy process. They are also trained in various aspects of media engagement that helped to build confidence in public speaking, candidate hustings, canvassing and media engagement.

Participants are also involved in campaigning; they are informed of election campaign strategy and operations and travel to an election to assist in the campaign. As part of the program, participants are able to attend the Green Party National Conference for free as volunteers, giving them an insight into policy creation and how to get involved in internal structures.

The highlight of the program is the 3-day trip to Brussels (funded by the European Parliament) to learn about the EU Parliament, the European Green Party and Federation of Young European Greens.



Enjoying the feast at the Liverpool Young Greens Co-Convenors' social event, 26.07.15

The benefits of the program are self-evident. Amelia Womack, Co-Deputy Leader of GPEW, is a graduate of the program as is Clifford Fleming, Co-Covenor of GPEW Young Greens. Such a program provides an important mechanism for identifying, developing and retaining leadership talent and a way for encouraging new members to become involved and take advantage of such opportunities.

The Australian Greens context

While there are clear differences between the structure of the Australian Greens and that of Greens Parties in the UK, the observations of their membership surge and challenges for member retention are relevant to the Australian context. The work done to make Party websites, marketing and communication consistent across the State Greens and Australian Greens parties and the internal development to professionalise the operations of the Greens in Australia are consistent with the approach taken by Greens Parties in the UK.

The Australian Greens and the Parliamentary Party Room have the greatest opportunity to promote Greens politics and drive the Green agenda at a national level. This also means that when new members join State Parties, they may come with particular expectations based on their impressions of the Australian Greens Representatives, rather than necessarily because of the work done by local activists.

Being a federation of State Greens parties, however, some will do better than others at building the capacity of local branches. Nonetheless, building local branches, assisting them to engage members in progressive, broadly Left campaigns and identifying and nurturing leadership talent are important factors in preparation for a membership increase.

While the Australian Greens may not be able to facilitate the membership increases seen in the UK over the previous two years, there are certainly things that can be implemented to ensure any new members are engaged, retained and developed into the Greens activists of the future.

¹ At the end of 2013, the membership was approximately 13,800 but by August 2015 membership had grown to more than 67,000.

² Interview with Chris Williams, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, Ward of Chelmsley Wood, 16.07.15.

³ Interview with Natalie Bennett, Leader of Green Party of England and Wales, 17.07.15; interview with Adam McGibbon, Campaign Manager for London Assembly elections and former Campaign Manager for Carolyn Lucas' re-election campaign, 17.07.15.

⁴ Interview with Tom Beckett, Fundraising and Strategic Operations Manager (and other staff of GPEW national office), 21.07.15.

⁵ Interview with Clifford Fleming, Co-Chair GPEW Young Greens, 20.07.15.

⁶ More than 3000 people joined GPEW in one day as a result of the debate situation; Interview with Tom Beckett, GPEW Fundraising and Strategic Operations Manager (and other staff of GPEW national office), 21.07.15.

⁷ This was ostensibly about fairness but politically driven to split the Left when the Right was being split with the inclusion of UKIP; Interview with Chris Williams, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, Ward of Chelmsley Wood, 16.07.15.

⁸ Interview with Amelia Womack, GPEW Co-Deputy Leader, 20.07.15; Interview with Clifford Fleming, Co-Chair GPEW Young Greens, 20.07.15.

⁹ Interview with Darren Johnson, GPEW Member of London Assembly, 30.07.15.

¹⁰ Interview with Clifford Fleming, Co-Chair GPEW Young Greens, 20.07.15.

¹¹ Interview with Ross Greer, Green Party of Scotland, Party Development Officer, 28.07.15.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The Scottish Assembly system gives every voter two votes; one is for the Constituency candidate (first past the post system) and the other is for the Regional List Candidate (Additional Member System) where the voter chooses their preferred Party and the Party chooses the list candidates. This is similar to the Mixed Member Proportional system in New Zealand.

¹⁴ One Local Green Party for example, went from just seven (7) regularly active members to having over 400 new members wanting to be involved and needing to be engaged; Interview with Martin Dobson, former GPEW candidate for Liverpool Riverside and former Chair of Liverpool Green Party, 26.07.15.

¹⁵ Interview with Natalie Bennett, Leader of Green Party of England and Wales, 17.07.15.

¹⁶ Interview with Adam McGibbon, Campaign Manager for London Assembly elections and former Campaign Manager for Carolyn Lucas' re-election campaign, 17.07.15; Interview with Martin Dobson, former GPEW candidate for Liverpool Riverside and former Chair of Liverpool Green Party, 26.07.15; Interview with Chris Williams, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, Ward of Chelmsley Wood, 16.07.15.

¹⁷ Interview with Chris Williams, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, Ward of Chelmsley Wood, 16.07.15.

¹⁸ Interview with Adam McGibbon, Campaign Manager for London Assembly elections and former Campaign Manager for Carolyn Lucas' re-election campaign, 17.07.15.

¹⁹ Interview with Clifford Fleming, Co-Chair GPEW Young Greens, 20.07.15.

²⁰ Interview with Natalie Bennett, Leader of Green Party of England and Wales, 17.07.15.